

HIGH LIGHTS OF THE GERMAN-SOVIET WAR

By O. PRINCIPINI

The German-Soviet war is being fought on such a tremendous scale of men and miles that it will for a long time be impossible to obtain a clear picture of the actual course of events. Yet some general outlines are discernible. It is already obvious that the battle between Germany and the USSR differs from the previous campaigns of the present war. Here are the views of a competent observer on the first twelve weeks of hostilities.—K.M.

The Russo-German conflict, in the first twelve weeks of war, has had two essential phases—the “battle of the frontier” and the “battle of the Stalin Line”: battles of giants, the struggle of colossal armies, along frontiers and in war-zones practically unlimited.

While it is still too early thoroughly to examine the various phases of the fighting, certain conclusions are already clearly enough revealed. However, an objective military or political observer, before reaching definite conclusions, must proceed cautiously, limiting himself to a rational examination of the first fundamental aspects of the tremendous struggle and deducting from them the basic elements for a logical and well-based judgment.

Out of the fog of military secrecy the first lights and shadows of the new war have begun to appear.

Russia, upon entering this war, could rely on two sources of strength: the tremendous distances, and the huge reserves of man-power and materials; we shall later see how these have been utilized by the Red High Command.

Initiative and surprise—two fundamental elements of success in war—seem to have disappeared immediately, and perhaps forever, from the hands of the Red Headquarters. Three other elements, however, seem still uncertain to the distant observer: the moral cohesion of the Red troops; the leadership of the Red Command; and the

actual provision of adequate, timely and efficient material aid to the Soviet Union by Britain and America.

NO BLITZKRIEG IN RUSSIA?

During the first week of the war there was real fear in London and Washington, perhaps more than in Moscow, of seeing Russia “blitzed” in a few weeks, as had been the case first in Poland, then France, and most recently in Yugoslavia and Greece. And as Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev are today still in Russian hands, the Anglo-American press speaks of a victorious Russian resistance.

The truth may very soon turn out to be quite different. It seems that in the Russian campaign the German Command has again taken the enemy by surprise, not only in the choice of time but also in the choice of tactical methods. It should be remembered that the real military purpose of a war is the defeat of the enemy forces, not the occupation of enemy territories. Victory is very often manifested, it is true, by the occupation of enemy territories, but not unless the occupation of the strategic territorial objectives presupposes the destruction of the defending forces by depriving the enemy of the very sources of his war-power and by striking directly at the heart and will of enemy resistance. All this is only true if, after the objectives have been reached, there are no more

enemy forces left capable of annulling the success already obtained.

From reports known to us up to now — reports that are necessarily fragmentary and incomplete — we are prompted to conclude that the German Command is applying in Russia a new tactical method which is perhaps most appropriate to the particular situation on the Russian front. There has been no spectacular drive, none of those audacious, impressive, arrow-like thrusts, as that on Lemberg in 1939 to cut any possible junction of Poland with Rumania, or as in France in 1940 the thrust on Amiens, Abbeville, and Dunkirk, or that on Athens through Salonika and Larissa. In the Russian campaign, the day-to-day situation of the opposing fronts has on some days shown wide and deep indentations toward the east; but generally the fronts have kept, and are continuing to keep, an almost unbroken line.

Perhaps the German Command, taking into consideration the vastness of the Red provinces and the great numerical strength of the Soviet armies, preferred to thrust directly into separate enemy armies instead of at great territorial objectives. In other words, "blitzkrieg" localized against the defending forces, as at Bialystok and Minsk, at Vitebsk and Smolensk, as recently between the lower Bug and lower Dniepr, and as in many other localities all along the wide Russian front.

STALIN LOSES ADVANTAGE OF SPACE

Another of the main conclusions it has been possible to draw immediately after the "battle of the frontier" is that Stalin has been compelled to give up his advantage of space. Enormous Russian land and aerial forces have been compelled to fight and have been defeated, all along the frontier, since the first day of the campaign without being able to withdraw to the main Russian defense line.

The "battle of the frontier" has fully confirmed what the German High Command suspected, namely, that Russia was for a long time secretly preparing for war, massing her forces to strike at Germany while the latter was engaged on other fronts. The tenacious resistance met by the German troops since the first day of this campaign has been possible only because there were already Russian troops and material at the Russo-German frontier practically ready to start the offensive themselves.

Perhaps history will later record that it is just this which has been the fatal self-condemnation of Soviet Russia. The timely move of the German Army compelled the Soviet Command to employ a great quantity of its forces when the Red Army was not yet completely ready to fight. And moreover, to fight not only at a time but also in a territory and in a manner less favorable to the Soviet forces.

In a defensive struggle such as the one now imposed on the Soviet forces, the Russian High Command had probably intended to exploit to the maximum the vastness and depth of the endless Soviet territory: in other words, to give up space in order to gain time; to gain time in order to prepare a fight under the most favorable conditions, namely, where, when, and in which-ever way the grouping of her own forces and the general situation makes it advisable to fight, that is, to maintain the bulk of her own forces at a great distance from the enemy with a view to keeping fully her own freedom of action and of maneuver; to withdraw as far as possible from the starting-bases of the German forces in order to compel the German Command to lose time by searching for the enemy, to build new advance-bases for its land and air forces, and to re-open long ways of communication or to bring into use new ones.

We all know today that exactly the opposite happened. The Red High Command had deployed towards the

west all the bulk, and perhaps the best part, of its mammoth war-machine: its headquarters, its mechanized units, its imposing land troops, its airfields, its deposits of supplies. These Russian forces, arrayed for an attack, were now suddenly forced to fight a defensive battle in a most critical situation. Since it was impossible to take up in time positions further back—as would have been advisable in a defensive battle—the Russian Command had to accept open battle from the first day of the war, under conditions of great disadvantage to its own forces. Indeed the German Army was able, from the beginning of the campaign, to develop to the full its unfailing ability for the offensive, operating at short distances from its own starting-bases.

For the Russian High Command the surprise was complete. Not until after the first week of war was it reorganized and the front divided into the three known sectors: northern, central, and southern (Voroshilov, Timoshenko, Budenny).

THE STALIN LINE

The Stalin Line has already given its name to the second phase of the war. The fate of the great fortified lines in this war has been unfortunate. Mannerheim, Maginot, and Metaxas were really ill-advised to give their names to the principal defensive organizations of Finland, France, and Greece. Will the name of Stalin be any more fortunate? The results so far achieved by the Germans justify us in seriously doubting this.

We do not as yet precisely know either the actual course or the constructive details of the "Stalin Line." It would seem likely that such a line has for its main object the defense of Moscow, Leningrad, and Kharkov; for its more immediate object the defense of the line of great advance centres: Reval-Smolensk-Kiev-Odessa. A summary glance at the map of Russia is sufficient to make clear that this line is undoubtedly powerful, due perhaps

more to its natural advantages than its defensive preparations. Of great value are the supporting wings at the two opposite ends of the line, facing respectively the Baltic and the Black Seas.

In the north, the system seems to have consisted of an advanced line of defense along the lower river Dvina, a line which is completed in the rear by an excellent defense in depth, linked up with the Lake Peipus region and supported at a convenient distance by the naval base of Kronstadt and the great supply base of Leningrad.

In the south, on the Black Sea front, there was another multiple system of defense lines. First, an advanced line of fortifications along the lower Dniestr, well supported by the central supply base of Odessa and by the naval base of Nikolayev. The main defense line was perhaps constructed along the lower river Bug. Still further to the east is a defense line curving back onto the lower Dniepr, whose course at this point turns in again towards the east, which is not very favorable for the economical defense of that territory.

In the centre, the Stalin Line was probably based on the rivers Dvina and Dniepr. Toward its centre the courses of these two rivers (flowing in opposite directions) do not meet but turn off at an abrupt right-angle to the east, forming in that sector a wide corridor, long known as the "Corridor of Smolensk." The cities of Vitebsk and Smolensk are both within this corridor. This is precisely the most dangerous point of the whole front, for through here passes the shortest route to Moscow, that is to the heart of the whole Russian defense system. Smolensk really deserves the name of the Western Gate of Moscow. Napoleon used this route for his advance on Moscow. In this war, Smolensk has already given its name to what is perhaps so far the bloodiest battle of the war. Both Vitebsk and Smolensk are entirely in the hands of German troops.

THE BATTLE OF THE STALIN LINE

This battle appears so far to be the decisive battle of the whole Russian campaign. War communiqués confirm with daily increasing clarity that the Russian High Command has decided to throw into the Stalin Line the greater part of its fighting forces. The battle is still in full swing, but the outlines are visible.

For many weeks the German High Command has been hammering at the Stalin Line at various points, alternating its blows between the centre and the north and the centre and the south; with feints to the right and real blows to the left; with feints towards the Baltic and a terrific blow towards the Black Sea. The Soviet Command has tried to parry these blows as best it could, and to stop up with all possible haste the most threatening gaps in the system, thereby undoubtedly using up tremendous quantities of its land and air forces.

In the south, large Axis forces have got around the Dniestr and Bug from above, so that these two rivers have quickly lost all defensive value. The conquest of Nikolayev has effectively sealed the fate of Odessa, if not the potential fate of the whole rich coastal region facing the Black Sea. In the centre, large German forces have crossed the Dniepr, and turning to the south, already menace the rear of the whole defense system hinging on the great population centre of Kiev. In the northern sector, Leningrad is gripped in a vice, from the south and from the north. The fall of Leningrad would entail that of Kronstadt, whereby the Soviet forces lose their last remaining communications with the Baltic.

THE SOVIET UNION NEEDS MORE ARMS

At the beginning of the war the world was stunned by information published about the Soviet Army: officers, air-

planes, tanks, in tens upon tens of thousands, soldiers in tens of millions; and other practically inexhaustible war resources in general. Truly impressive figures, even in comparison with the colossal war machines of the most modern and most powerful countries in the world.

Today, after over two months of war, Stalin has apparently sent out desperate S.O.S. messages to his friends in London and Washington. We do not know yet whether he has asked for aid in the form of man-power; but he has certainly made urgent requests for help in the form of war machinery and munitions, and perhaps of food; and it seems he even needs gasoline and other fuels and lubricants.

Supposing that all these things were available, how are they going to reach Russia? There is the painful question of ships already sunk in huge numbers on all the Seven Seas. This problem of transport was of most pressing urgency even before the German-Soviet war created new demands.

THE SOVIET COMMAND AND THE RUSSIAN SOLDIER

The capacity for leadership of the Russian High Command cannot yet be definitely judged, but it can already be subjected to severe criticism. The Red Army has long been called a "giant with a head of clay." Years of "Red purges" have wrought havoc in the Army, particularly in the upper command, causing a grave crisis in quantity and quality, which has most certainly had an unfavorable influence on the conduct of the war. Up till now the Russian High Command has had to submit almost entirely to the initiative of the enemy.

Commanders and general staffs are not to be found in a hurry. To prepare good military leaders, just as to prepare good scientists, years of intensive, patient, and conscientious work are necessary; above all today, when technical science pervades and often pre-

dominates in nearly all fields of war activity. The use of large modern armies, provided with complex and delicate instruments of war, requires in the commanders a capacity for organization which can only be acquired after long and assiduous experience of command.

Anti-Soviet propaganda, especially that of England and America, has always represented Russia as a herd of cattle, held together by the whip of the herdsman Stalin with the aid of his faithful horde of vicious watchdogs, the OGPU. With or without a whip, the fact remains that the Red soldiers have certainly put up a good fight these first two months of war. The German Command has not failed to point this out. The younger generation in Russia, having grown up in the atmosphere of the Soviet regime, has learned to obey, to march and to die.

THE RED ARMY AND THE LESSONS OF PREVIOUS CAMPAIGNS

Russia entered the war nearly two years after the outbreak of the present European war. By now the Red Army has had the benefit of utilizing to its own advantage the lessons learned by others through experience. In this war, absolute supremacy in land warfare has until now been held continuously by the airplane and the tank. The binomial term of attack, "planes and tanks," has suddenly altogether ousted the old binomial term of defense, "trenches and machine-guns," which largely predominated in all sectors of the last World War.

Up till the beginning of the present war, the Red Army seemed to be among the best equipped in the world, especially in the fields of aviation and mechanized forces; at least in quantity if not in quality. It was therefore in a position to carry out a rapid adaptation to new methods of land warfare, based precisely on the intelligent use of airplanes and tanks.

In considering the Soviet performances so far one must recognize that "planes and tanks" are primarily used for offensive and counter-offensive. Russia, forced suddenly to fight on the defensive, has not been able to make much use of her great numerical strength in airplanes and tanks; moreover many were quickly destroyed by the German forces. The overrated Soviet parachute troops never put in a serious appearance.

The Red Army does not seem to have succeeded in contriving an "armor of defense" capable of halting effectively the attacking might of modern technical and aerial forces. But it has learned from the French defeat to fight in a very deep front and always to keep sufficient reserves to deal with enemy forces that have succeeded in breaking through.

REPERCUSSIONS

In the general field of the European conflict, the beginning of the Russo-German campaign had tremendous repercussions; it was immediately hailed by the Anglo-American press. London heaved a sigh of relief. The specter of a German invasion vanished once again. At Suez and at Gibraltar anxiety diminished. Traditional British policy could really boast of a genuine success. At last a new ally had joined the British Forces. Stalin was preparing to fight to the last Russian. In the heart of every Englishman was kindled the hope of seeing Germany hopelessly bogged in the Pripiet marshes, crushed in the embrace of the Russian giant.

But apparently Stalin was more realistic, directly attacking the vital part of the problem: the active and effective co-operation of England and America. He would not be satisfied with empty guarantees like those given to Poland and others. He wanted not fine words but deeds: airplanes, cannons, munitions; not bombardments by Reuter but genuine and effective

bombardments against the common enemy; fewer hymns of praise in honor of the Soviet soldiers but effective co-operation of British soldiers.

This new problem soon became a major anxiety for London as well as Washington. Were they to make British troops march on the heels of the Axis? This was without doubt the most propitious moment to date, with the greater part of the Axis troops engaged on the eastern front.

But where were they to march British troops to? The European continent? The High Command in London is still nursing the wounds received by British forces in Norway, at Dunkirk, and in the Balkans. Moreover, to dis-

embark on the Continent would mean ships, thousands of ships.

Perhaps the possibility could be examined of another enterprise where the going was easy, such as the offensive in Cyrenaica against Italian troops who were without mechanized equipment; or the offensive in East Africa against Italian forces who had been isolated from their own country for a year; or the most recent campaigns against Iraq and the French in Syria?

We know now that the answer was Iran. This occupation of a neutral country brings British soldiers to the Persian oilfields and to the gates of those of Baku. How much the Russians will benefit by it, remains to be seen.